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ABSTRACT

English as second language (ESL) learners often avoid using the present perfect or use it improperly. In contrast with native speakers of English sampled from newspaper editorials, of whom 75 percent used the present perfect, only 22 percent of ESL college students used the present perfect correctly. This avoidance is due in part to lack of understanding of the function of the present perfect. Most common explanations of present perfect usage place undue emphasis on adverbials and label the present perfect as a tense that covers past to present time. This approach is an overgeneralization that is misleading for the ESL student because it does not consider the contexts in which the present perfect is used, especially in contrast with the simple past. In addition, the exercises used to give students practice in forming the present perfect do not provide insight into the function of the present perfect as a qualifying technique. Practice using the present perfect should be viewed as a composition problem and should show how writing about current topics can be enriched and varied by bringing in relevant past details. Graphs on frequency of present perfect usage and references are appended. (RW)

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# The Perfect Aspect as a State of Being

by

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of TESOL, Hawaii, May 1982

ABSTRACT

Most ESL textbook explanations of the present perfect put an overwhelming emphasis on the types of adverbials that may or may not co-occur with the present perfect. It appears that the result of this approach has lead to a labelling of the present perfect as a "tense" that covers past to present time. This approach is an over-generalization and is misleading for the ESL student since it does not consider the contexts in which the present perfect is used, especially in contrast with the simple past. In this presentation it will be shown that an approach with analyzes the present perfect as being used in present tense contexts with the past participles interpreted as describing states of being is more consistent with actual usage of the present perfect and subsumes those cases where the present perfect is taken to be associated with past-to-present adverbials. Supporting evidence for this approach and the relative inadequacy of the adverbial co-occurrence approach will be supplied from a random sampling of present perfect usage in newspaper texts.

## Avoidance of the Present Perfect

There are three principal mistakes that ESL learners make with the present perfect:

a) They form it improperly.

b) They use it with the improper adverbials.

c) They avoid it.

Of these three, avoidance of the present perfect is the most difficult to remedy, and among intermediate and advanced students, perhaps the most prevalent error.

Avoidance of the present perfect is a logical strategy because other verb forms or circumlocutions are available. For example, in a random sample of 100 expository compositions written for the UCLA ESL Placement Exam in the Fall, 1981, only twenty-eight students used the present perfect and of those, only twenty-two used it appropriately. Figure 1 compares two distributions of total test scores on this exam. Above are the scores of those who used the present perfect and used it correctly, while below are those who did not. It appears that present perfect usage is related to higher proficiency scores, but not necessarily vice versa.

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Insert Figure 1 about Here

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If one were to look at common examples of native speakers' expository writing much greater use of the present perfect

can be observed.

In an examination of three Sunday editions of editorial sections from the Los Angeles Times (Sept. 27, 1981, Oct. 25, 1981, and Nov. 1, 1981), it was found that out of 63 writers about 75% of them used the present perfect. This is in contrast to the 28% rate among the ESL students. Even in the sports sections (from a sample of editions published during the first week of February, 1982), where one would expect more straight reporting of past events, a rate of 60% present perfect usage was found. Figures 2, 3, and 4 show this more clearly. Figure 2 shows the frequency of usage of the present perfect among the 100 ESL compositions, whereas Figures 3 and 4 show the comparable distributions from the editorial and sports writers. In general, all three distributions have a similar shape, but the native writers have proportionately fewer 0-usage frequencies and a greater spread toward the right.

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Insert Figures 2, 3, & 4 about Here

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It seems clear that with only a 28% usage rate among the ESL students at UCLA, there is a significant amount of avoidance behavior going on. One of the reasons for this avoidance is that ESL students do not understand the function of the present perfect and that most native speakers themselves are unable to provide a consistent explanation for why the present perfect should be used in a given situation.

Traditional Explanations of the Present Perfect

Most explanations of present perfect usage are post hoc in nature and seem to depend more on the particular verb used, the adverbials involved, and the context of the usage rather than on any inherent meaning of the present perfect itself. For example, the most ready explanation of the present perfect is that it is a tense which covers a past-to-present period of time such as in Sentence 1.

1) I have lived in Los Angeles since 1951.

Not only does this explanation depend on the "since 1951" adverbial, but many present perfect usages do not agree with this explanation. For one thing, the past tense can be used with past-to-present adverbials (e.g., Up to now, I always had a good job), and in other instances, such as in Sentence 2, the time of the verb does not extend into the present, yet the present perfect may be used.

2) I have passed the preliminary orals for my doctorate.

Trying to be consistent with the first explanation, some instructors will invoke a psychological past-to-present explanation (e.g., Frank, p.78, 1972) for Sentence 2. That is, the present perfect is used because the writer feels a past-to-present time period. This explanation is rather vague and really does

not provide the ESL learner with sufficient guidelines about how he or she should use the present perfect.

In other instances the present perfect is said to express actions that took place at indefinite times in the past, in contrast to the past tense which would be used to express definite past times (e.g., Quirk & Greenbaum, p.44, 1975, or Praninskas, p.184, 1975). An example of an indefinite present perfect is Sentence 3.

3) I have seen a meteor shower.

The problem here is that the ESL student might think of an action as taking place at a definite past time and, therefore, not use the present perfect where it is quite acceptable or even desirable, as in Sentence 4.

4) I'm laughing because I've just heard the craziest joke.

However, the instructor might explain that the present perfect can be used in sentences such as 4 because it expresses the immediate past (e.g., Frank, p.80, 1975, or Eckersley & Eckersley, p.175, 1973). But now we have a direct contradiction. On the one hand we are told that the present perfect expresses an indefinite past time, yet in 4, the adverb just implies the time is known and definite.

One seemingly safe course of action is to ignore these explanations and choose the simple past, which is just what most ESL students seem to do. If the present perfect is to be taught properly, ESL students must be given more consistent explanations of present perfect usage. In order to do this, one must first be able to describe how the present perfect is used in actual contexts.

## The Present Contexts of Present Perfect Sentences

In one experimental study (Moy, 1977), the usage of the present perfect among native speakers of English was induced, without the use of adverbials, simply by providing a present tense context to which past actions could be related. The principal conclusion of the study was that the current relevance interpretation of past actions was very important in determining whether or not a native speaker would use the present perfect or the past tense.

With this in mind, it seems that the present perfect can be used whenever the present is the principal time perspective. This would be particularly true of expository writing, in contrast to, say, an objective description of the procedures performed in a science experiment.

If one examines how the LA Times editorial writers mentioned above used the present perfect, it is interesting to note that on the average, 60% of each writer's usages of the present perfect were without any time adverbials at all; this includes

adverbs of frequency, duration, or those that cover past-to-present periods of time. This is illustrated in Figure 5. On the right-hand side, it can be seen that 12 out of the 48 writers who used the present perfect did not use any time adverbials at all. At the other end of the spectrum, 7 writers always used time adverbials with their present perfects. However, as can be seen, most of the writers tended not to use time adverbials.

Sentences 5-9 are randomly chosen examples of these no-time adverb present perfect sentences.

5) There have been wars that had to be fought.
6) Solidarity has tried to counter the argument.
7) This has been achieved along with demographic changes which show the city's public students are now 70% Black and Latino, 24% white and 6% Asian.
8) Many are House freshmen who were narrowly elected last November and know they have been targeted for extinction by Democratic campaign strategists.
9) 21 states, including California, have passed statutes declaring small group residences be considered single-family dwellings for zoning purposes.

As can be seen, these present perfect usages are of the psychological past-to-present or indefinite past types. Initially, the impression is that it is up to the writer whether to use the present perfect or the simple past. The selection,

though, of the present perfect is not arbitrary, but, instead, is contingent on the existence of a present tense context to which it can be related. For the present perfect Sentences 5-9, the contexts were not hard to identify. Their respective contextualizing sentences along with their present perfect embellishments are as follows:

10) Not every military action is an adventure. There have been wars that had to be fought.

11) Are strikes really the appropriate weapon in a country plagued by strikes? Solidarity has tried to counter the argument.

12) New York (SAT) candidates now score 3 points better than the national average on the verbal test and 5 points better on the math. This has been achieved along with demographic changes which show the city's public students are now 70% Black and Latino, 24% white and 6% Asian.

13) The political effect of another budget battle probably concerns the liberal Republicans more than does its economic impact. Many are House freshmen who were narrowly elected last November and know they have been targeted for extinction by Democratic campaign strategists.

14) (Many states) recognize the compelling need to find satisfactory homes for their deinstitutionalized patients. 21 states, including California, have

passed statutes declaring small group residences be considered single-family dwellings for zoning purposes.

In fact, for all uses of the present perfect, including those with time adverbials, one should be able to identify a present tense context. It is these contexts that the ESL student should learn to recognize and react to when it comes to deciding whether or not the present perfect can be used.

The State of Being Interpretation of the Present Perfect

Teachers who emphasize the association of the present perfect with the surface features of time adverbials and particular interpretations are giving their students a distorted and static view of how the present perfect is actually used.

Instead, they should emphasize the qualifying nature of the present perfect. According to Strang (1962), it is a verb form which expresses a state of being from having done something in the past. Under this interpretation, one can look at the verb form as if the have were a main verb with the possessive meaning of have and the past participle were an adjective describing a state of being. This interpretation can be explicitly illustrated by the following series of sentences under #15.

15) I should be hired as an engineer because I have a college degree and 10 years of on-the-job experience. I also have extensive contacts in the professional

world. On the creative side, I have written several articles in my engineering specialization and have invented five different kinds of widgets.

If one interprets the present perfect as a qualifying device, then it should provide a consistent rationale for using the present perfect in all contexts. It is argued here that the native speaker does not use the present perfect to express a past-to-present time frame, but to serve as a qualification. If the present tense form of have is used, the qualification expresses a state of being relevant to the present, while if the past tense is used, the state of being is relevant to a past time.

The relevance of the state of being can only be determined from the context in which the present perfect sentence is used. It is for this reason that one should not judge the grammaticality of the present perfect sentence in isolation. For example, sentence 16 is grammatically acceptable in #17 but not in #18.

16) I have telephoned the police.

17) I think I saw a prowler around your house, but don't worry. I have telephoned the police and they will be here in five minutes.

*18) I saw a prowler around his house. Then I ran into my home and I have telephoned the police.

In 17, the context is a present tense situation in which one person is attempting to calm another person by telling him why he should not worry. The second context, 18, is not a present tense context but a narrative description of a series of events. Here, a qualification is not needed. If an ESL student were to produce a sentence like 18, the instructor should point out that there is no present tense situation to relate the present perfect sentence.

In contrasting Sentences 17 and 18, it is only the qualification explanation of the present perfect that will work. Any past-to-present time interpretation will not hold. For example, Sentence 18 may be used to tell the police what had happened only five minutes before, yet it is not grammatical to use the present perfect. If one uses the psychological past-to-present explanation, the ESL student can rationally argue that the effects of the telephoning are still being felt and the present perfect can be used in both contexts.

## Conclusion

A major change in emphasis in ESL textbook explanations of the present perfect must be made. Instead of concentrating on surface features of present perfect usage, especially in regard to the use of which adverbials may or may not co-occur with the present perfect, more importance must be placed on the contexts in which the present perfect is used.

This is especially true of the exercises which the ESL instructor

uses to give the student practice in using the present perfect. Many exercises simply require the ESL student to transform a past tense sentence into the present perfect, or to make up sentences about what he or she has just done. These are fine for giving the student practice in forming the present perfect, but they do not give any insight into the function of the present perfect as a qualifying technique. This should be recognized by the ESL teacher and the students must be made aware that usage of the present perfect goes beyond paying attention to adverbs and special meanings. Instead, practice in using the present perfect is actually a composition problem where students are shown how their writing about current topics can be enriched and varied by bringing in relevant past details.

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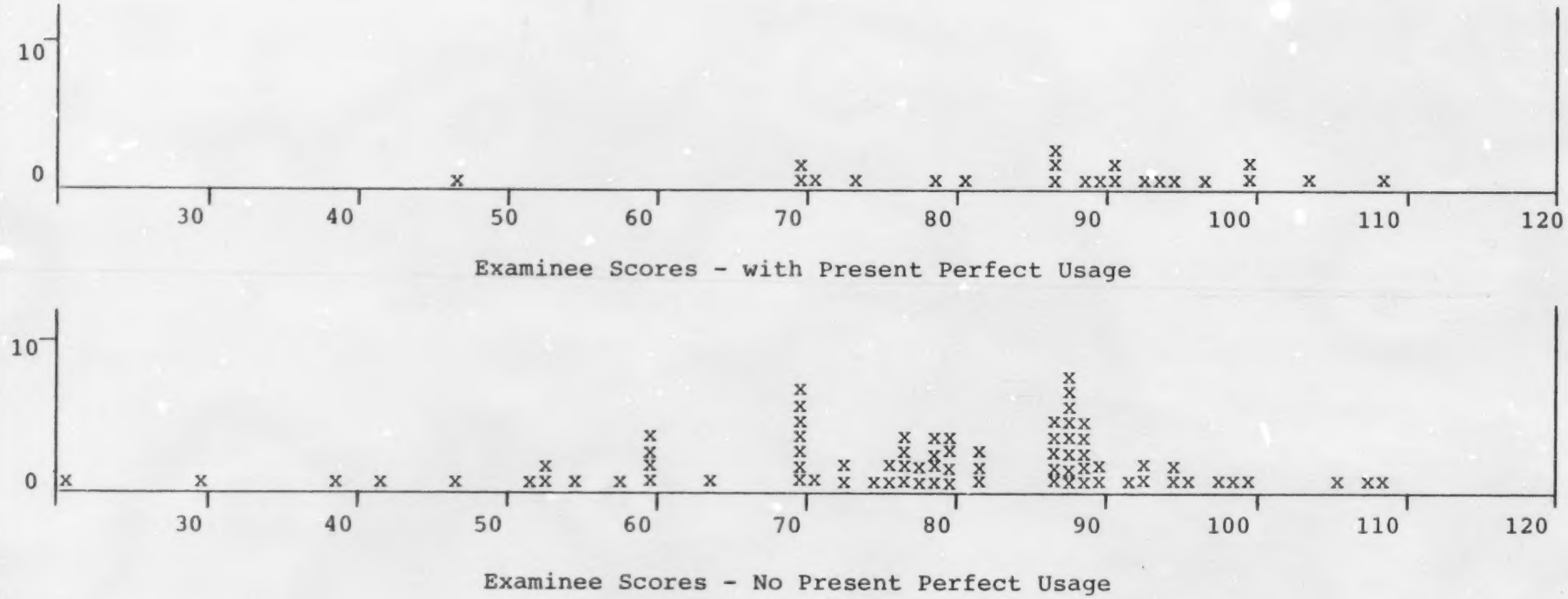


Figure 1. Distribution of total raw scores on the UCLA ESLPE for examinees who demonstrated usage of the present perfect (N=22, $\bar{X}$ = 86.64) versus those who did not (N= 78, $\bar{X}$ = 77.68).

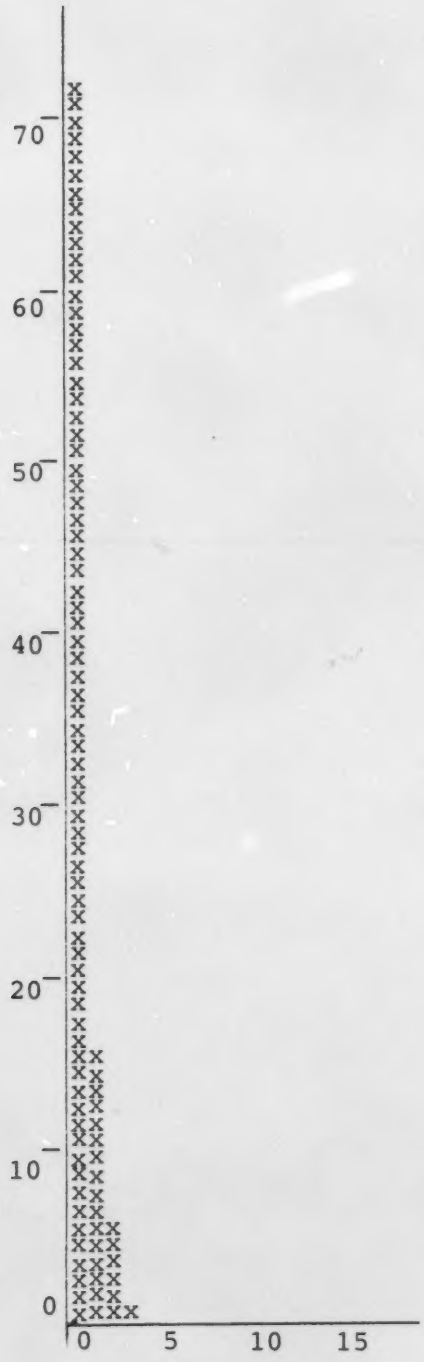


Figure 2. Distribution of present perfect usage frequencies for 100 ESL examinees.

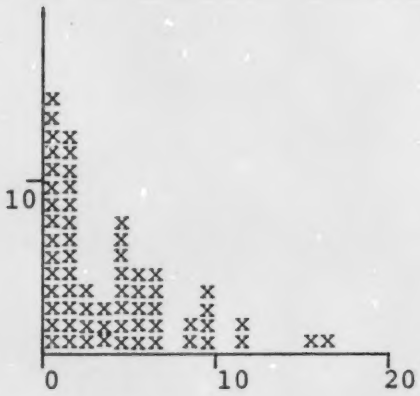


Figure 3. Distribution of present perfect usage frequencies for 63 authos of LA Times editorials.

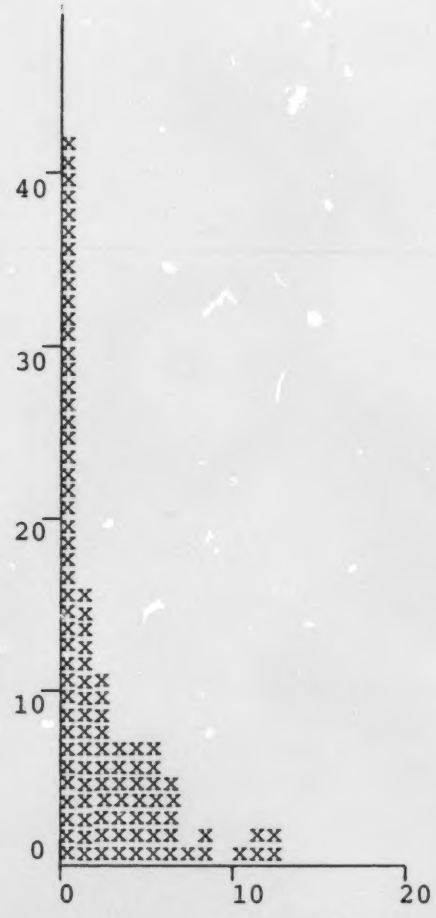


Figure 4. Distribution of present perfect usage frequencies for 103 authors of LA Times sports section articles.

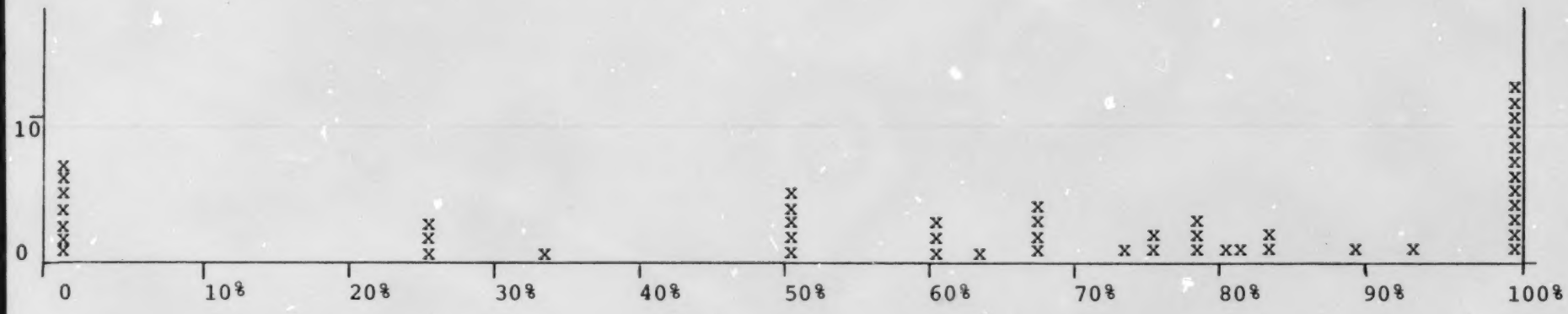


Figure 5. Distribution of percent present perfect usage without time adverbials among 48 editorial writers of the LA Times.